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Q4(b)

Hannah Arendt analysed a few categories of vita activa. Explain

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · PSIR GS 1 · 15 marks · Indian Nationalism

Indian Nationalism: Political Strategies of India's Freedom Struggle; Perspectives on Indian National Movement; Gandhi, Tagore, Nehru, Ambedkar, and the socialists.

Core demand of the question

- State Arendt's vita activa against a life devoted only to contemplation or to labour as metabolism
- Explain labour, work, and action as distinct categories
- **Show their political meaning:** **plurality**, public space, and the danger of the social
- Keep the answer on The Human Condition

Revision summary

Arendt's vita activa comprises labour, work, and action as distinct human activities.

Labour is the cyclical metabolism of life; its typical figure is **animal laborans**, which modernity threatens to make universal.

Work is homo faber's fabrication of a durable world, necessary but dangerous when politics is treated as making a product.

Action is political life among a **plurality** of unique equals, needing a public realm, speech, promise, and forgiveness.

The rise of the social and of totalitarianism both destroy the space of action, which is her warning to modern democracy.

Introduction

Hannah Arendt in The Human Condition (1958) analysed the **vita activa** - the active life - as three activities: labour, work, and action. She was not writing a psychology of busyness. She was recovering a political anthropology. Human beings live among others. The highest worldly activity is action in a public space of speech and deeds, not the endless cycle of consumption.

Body**Labour**

- **Labour is the body's activity that corresponds to life:** food, care, the cycle of consumption. It never finishes. Arendt feared that modernity makes **animal laborans** typical: living standards rise while citizenship empties. **Marx** glorified labour as human essence; she thought that still left politics as management of life-processes rather than as a public world of unique persons.

Work

Work is homo faber building a durable world - a table, a law, a wall - with a beginning and an end. It gives human beings a home in the world and a stage on which they can appear before

others. The danger is instrumentalism: persons as material for a product. **Plato's** craftsman-king is, for her, politics mistaken for fabrication.

Action

Action is politics proper in her sense of the *vita activa*. It corresponds to **plurality**: equal and distinct persons. It needs speech and a public realm of memory. Promise and forgiveness remedy its unpredictability. The stylised Greek polis was such a space; totalitarianism, as Arendt showed in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, destroys **plurality** and reduces humans to interchangeable bundles of reaction. A life of only labour is worldless; a life of only work can build cages. The rise of the social lets the household's life-process invade the public. Bureaucracy administers labour while action shrinks to voting or to violence. Democracy must keep a public space where unique persons begin something new among equals.

Flow diagram

Vita activa -> Labour / animal laborans
Vita activa -> Work / homo faber
Vita activa -> Action / plurality
Labour / animal laborans -> Life process
Work / homo faber -> Durable world
Action / plurality -> Public speech and deeds

Conclusion

Vita activa is labour that keeps us alive, work that builds a world, and action that discloses who we are among others. Arendt's political theory privileges action and **plurality** against a society of jobholders and against a craftsman's state. Without that distinction, democracy becomes housekeeping on a national scale.

Facts & figures

The Human Condition, 1958

Arendt's systematic account of labour, work, and action as the three activities of the *vita activa*.

Plurality

The condition of politics: human beings are equal and distinct, so action is never the deed of one sovereign maker.

Animal laborans

The figure of a life absorbed in labour and consumption, which Arendt feared was becoming the normal condition of mass society.